

ZARIF

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The child of a Scottish father and Iranian Jewish mother, 23-year-old extrovert singer/songwriter Zarif has crammed a lot into a short space of time, making her name in an underground London scene. And her unusual background helps explain her singular and eclectic approach.

"I always loved music," she explains, going back to her childhood in Harrow, on the north western fringes of London. "But I didn't get my first CD player until I was 11. I'd always record Top of the Pops and watch it over and over, learning the dance moves to Michael Jackson videos. But I was always writing songs".

Her first was written when she was seven years old, and submitted as an entry to a Blue Peter competition. And although she had no real idea of what the music business was, Zarif wasn't slow in getting the hang of how it might work. "We had a girl band," she says, wincing slightly, "called Girls of Tomorrow. This basically involved standing in peoples' front rooms and going, 'We've got a song!'" she says in her atypical brazenly honest manner.

Soon Zarif was listening not just to the pop hits of Michael and Madonna, but working her way through Stevie Wonder and Prince albums, sneaking in to indie and rock clubs in Camden Town and Soho, digging Faith No More and the Red Hot Chili Peppers, and immersing herself in hip hop and R&B acts like En Vogue. "Music was always something I wanted to do," Zarif recalls, "but I never thought that was realistic. I'd been singing properly for a year and a half, and was about to do an art foundation course, then at the last minute I just thought, 'If I'm going to do it, it has to be now.' So I took a year out and joined loads of bands. It wasn't like any of them required a massive time commitment – it was more a case of someone needing a singer, and I'd be like, 'Yep, I'll do it!'"

By now convinced that music was going to be her life, Zarif decided she still needed to finish her education, and enrolled at University College, London to study Social Sciences. "I thought, 'I'll either quit, or I'll do loads of music while I'm here,'" she says.

She continued writing, and her style coalesced into a blend that showed off her '80s pop influences, the dynamics she'd absorbed from the rock and indie worlds, and some hip hop techniques, such as the incorporation of samples and breakbeats; but all within the rubric of the classic Stevie/Prince-style soul canon. She also filled her spare time doing some backing vocal gigs with friends, and started singing at little jazz nights."

By the time the University course ended – she got her degree – Zarif had decided that she was going to pursue her music career full time "I just thought, 'Right, I'm going to concentrate,'" she says. "'I'm either gonna end up in a job I'll hate, or I'm going to make a

go of this.' So I got a band together, played some gigs, and sung at every soul open mic night I could find."

London's soul singer-songwriter open mic circuit is one of the capital's best-kept secrets. At a series of venues across the city, songwriters get to test out new material in front of their peers; at some nights, house bands learn new songs submitted in advance and back the songwriters who turn up to sing them. It sounds like a real challenge for a young performer. "They're not a bitchy audience – it's quite a warm atmosphere," Zarif says, "but it's kind of petrifying when you first do it. Everyone that goes there - *everyone* - is a singer. They all get on stage and do it, and they all listen to you really carefully. For a singer going up on stage it's quite an intimidating environment, but once you're up there it's great."

It was on one of these stages that Zarif was spotted by highly acclaimed DJ/producer duo 'The Nextmen', who immediately asked her to feature on three tracks on their album 'This Was Supposed To Be The Future' and their single 'Something Got You', released in the summer of 2007. This led to her performing at countless festivals last summer, and this summer (including Glastonbury and Bestival) and to sessions with Groove Armada and The Rakes.

Since then, Zarif has been working with producers including Fraser T Smith (Kano), Full Phatt (Christina Milian), Blair Makichan (Lilly Allen), and Tommy D (Kanye West). The songs run the gamut from the bluesy pop of Silent Rooms, with its nod to Stevie Wonder's Higher Ground, the echo of Young-Holt's Soulful Strut in the first single, Let Me Back, and the hint of her mother's culture found in the eastern-tinged Breakout.

"It's definitely seeped in there," she agrees. "My mum would sing around the house all the time, so I've obviously soaked that up. I'm also drawn to melodies in minor keys, with lots of soul, and that's something you find a lot in Middle Eastern music. But I'm not sure how convincingly I did it. I played it to my mum and she said, 'Well, maybe English people'll like it.' Thanks, mum!"

While her mother's isn't perhaps the most ringing endorsement, we think it's not just English people who'll warm to Zarif's unique blend of ideas, sounds and styles. This is one story that looks like having a very happy ending.

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